You are all brothers (Mt 23:8)

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Damien,
a universal brother

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Hawaiian painter

What name suits us more: **"father"** or **"brother"**?

"Good morning, Father Javier". Or "How are you Brother?" What do we hear more often? What do people call us? What do we call ourselves? How do we sign letters or documents? What appears on our business card?

Even recognizing a diversity of practices depending on people, places and cultures, there is no doubt that the form of address most used throughout the world to address the religious of the Sacred Hearts, after they have been ordained priests, is that of "father". The form of address "brother" usually remains reserved for the lay religious, those who are not ordained.

Last December, the Holy See presented a document dated August 15, 2015, dedicated to the identity of the religious brother in male consecrated life. The document, prepared by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL), has as its subtitle the phrase Jesus addressed to his disciples: ***"And you are all brothers"*** (Mt 23:8). It seemed to me that, although the document speaks of

“brothers”, it also has a lot to say to us, who are a “clerical” congregation, that is to say made up mostly of priests (“fathers”).

Below, I will present some ideas in the document to you, using many of its phrases and expressions. In each paragraph, after relating what the document says about the religious brother, I will add what I consider is a challenge for us religious “fathers”.

The treasure of fraternity

The document speaks of the “collective Christian treasure”, which consists of the basic dimension of **fraternity** in Christ that makes all of us equal in dignity as sons and daughters of God. Religious life, predominantly lay in its origins, proposes the cultivation of this treasure as its main objective, seeking configuration with Christ in his celibate, poor and obedient way of living. Male religious are called to be brothers of Christ, brothers among themselves and brothers of all human beings.

However, “over the centuries, this goal, so essential to consecrated life, has run the risk of taking second place in male religious life, in favor of priestly functions.” (9). When in making ourselves “**fathers**” we obscure our nature as “brothers”, we cease to be memory of the collective Christian treasure, which is universal fraternity, and we are no longer visible signs of the face of brother Christ in the Church (*“the firstborn among many brothers”* Rm 8:29).

Belonging to the People of God

The religious **brother** is lay. He is called to insert himself naturally into the Christian community and human society. The religious brother spontaneously enters into communion with the committed layperson in the Church; both can work on an equal footing, establishing horizontal relationships, “in the face of the temptation to dominate, to search for the best place or to exercise authority as power” (7). On the other hand, religious brothers usually have less difficulty in forming a “charismatic family” with laity, sharing charism and mission with laypersons who see themselves called to live their faith inspired by the same charism of the religious congregation.

Religious “**fathers**”, however, almost always place ourselves in positions of authority with respect to the laity. In general, we have a tendency to consider other Christians as collaborators rather than as equals. On the other hand, one has to recognize that many religious priests fail to embrace, sympathetically, the call to form “charismatic family” with sisters and with the secular branch. It is difficult for us to enter into this dynamic of horizontality.

Let us remember, then, that *we are all brothers*, and let us make ordained ministry a true service of fraternity among the People of God.

Fraternal life in community

The **brother** grows in fraternal communion in common life. The local community is his environment, his new family. “Mutual love is the hallmark of Christians (cf. Jn 13:35), and this is the sign which Brothers offer” (24). The joy of fraternity lies in the fact that we are united by the Lord and not by blood ties or personal relationship. A fruit of that joy is the readiness to care for one another, especially those who are weaker (like the elderly and sick) or who are in difficulty.

However, we all know well that many religious “**fathers**” tend to be resistant to the demands and practices of community life. Work in the parish and other priestly responsibilities are often the usual excuse for not getting involved in community life. The exercise of ministry runs the risk of forming independent personalities, with their own world of relationships separate from the religious community. As for “father”, he likes to be independent and is more comfortable organizing his life himself.

Even today in our Congregation, provincials many times continue allowing (and even deciding) that religious “fathers” might live alone or in groups of two, without forming a religious community. The reason cited is always that of the bishop’s needs or that the parish can only pay one salary, etc. In these cases, being “fathers” leads us to stop being “brothers” and kills our common religious life.

Let us remember, then, that *we are all brothers*, and let us make ordained ministry a ferment of communion among us. The priesthood is a ministry of communion, starting with its religious community. Being “father” does not exempt one from community life; on the contrary, it configures us to Christ the servant and leads us to patient loving care of the brothers.

Working in the world

The religious **brother** is not conditioned by seminary studies nor by priestly functions. Hence, he is free to be inserted in any dimension of human reality. With good professional preparation, he can enter into the world of culture, work, science, health, education, social work, and in any other, seeking the reality of God in secular realities. “The Brother is aware that all creation is imbued with the love and presence of God”, and for this reason develops “the commitment to quality professional service in every task, no matter how profane it may seem.” (11). His professional work is also a way of earning a living and of contributing to the economic needs of the community. Additionally, with his work, the brother is able to go out and meet any human reality, without confining himself to the group of those who are believers.

The religious “**father**”, however, is generally limited to functions within the Church, dedicated to the ministerial care of the people of God. His professional formation is often reduced to theology, so his sphere of action is conformed to pastoral service and he is not trained for work in civil society nor manual labor. It is true that our initial formation programs foster, with good judgement, manual labor that helps one to maintain a frugal and simple life and makes us more helpful and useful to others. Nevertheless, once we are “father” sometimes we even forget how to wash our clothes, clean our rooms or wash the dishes!

Let us remember, then, that *we are all brothers*, and let us joyfully accept being 'little' brothers, always ready for the most humble services, willing to live off the fruit of our work, and interested in going out to meet those who do not come to Church asking for our pastoral services.

Memory of the love of Jesus

In order to go into more depth in the identity of the religious brother, the document refers to the command of Jesus at the Last Supper. In the gospel of John, after washing the feet of his disciples, Jesus says, *"as I have done for you, you should also do"* (Jn 13:14-15). In the Synoptics after distributing his Body and his Blood, he says, "*do this in memory of me*" (Lk 22:19). They are two ways of remembering the mystery of Jesus: through the priesthood of the "fathers" (presiding at Eucharist), or through the service of the "brothers" (washing the feet of others).

The **brother** carries out Jesus' mandate of love in numerous services, above all in those for the most weak and needy of the human family. Being a brother, he can go to all those margins and borders about which we speak so much. The brother "feels urged to seek out and to make a place at the table of the Kingdom for those who have nothing to eat, the socially excluded and those marginalized from progress. This is the Eucharist of life, which the brother is invited to celebrate" (20).

The religious "**father**", however, tends to remain in his clerical world, which often cuts off his freedom to engage in direct service to the poorest.

Let us remember, then, that *we are all brothers*, and let us join the presidency at the Eucharistic table with the concrete service of washing the feet of the little ones and those who are excluded.

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These are a few points that gave me pause for thought in connection with reading the document *"And you are all brothers"*. Our 2012 General Chapter delivered a special message to all the priests in the Congregation (Mission 21-30). The General Chapter invited

> *living the ordained ministry as fully as possible as SSCC religious. We need to look deeper for an integrated way of seeing ourselves as SSCC priest-religious. We need to have a vision that harmonizes these two dimensions. We need a model that helps an "SSCC priest" to live his missionary vocation of service in an integrated, peaceful and fruitful way.*

In order to seek this harmony requested by the General Chapter, it would do us well always to remember that, before "fathers", priests or ministers, ***we are all BROTHERS***, and that this is the only name by which Jesus knows us.